*Framing the landscape: Prichard's **Pioneers** and Esson's **The Drovers***

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One of the key preoccupations in Australian drama is the presence and agency of landscape. This claim is perhaps most obviously illustrated in the bush plays of the first half of this century, a genre concerned primarily with the physical rigours imposed on struggling landholders by an unforgiving bush environment. Two plays from this tradition, both written in 1919, constitute the focus of this essay; it is worth observing here, however, that Katharine Brisbane's description of 'the tyrannous landscape' as the source of Australia's 'national romantic paranoia'[1] has currency in the 1990s, especially when landscape is understood as a socio-cultural, rather than a topographical, phenomenon. For as has been shown by recent work in a range of disciplines including cultural studies, literary theory and human geography, 'landscape' is not a naturally occurring, empirical reality. Rather, it is a human construction, a discursive formation related to – but distinct from – the 'land', which exists as an a priori entity, independent of human systems. Landscape, then, implies a viewer, a human presence whose description (representation) of the environment proceeds according to a vision shaped by a particular set of cultural orientations, and within available modes of discourse. Rendering landscape thus becomes the practice of altering the 'disposition of 'Nature' to . . . [a particular] point of view'.[2] From this perspective, landscapes can be understood as texts, or sign systems which transform ideologies into concrete form and which make possible, though critical analysis, insights into the ideological dispositions which inform them.

In this essay, I will examine the representation of bush landscapes in two early Australian one-act plays: *Pioneers* by Katharine Susannah Prichard; and *The Drovers* by Louis Esson.[3] These plays belong to the tradition of realist bush drama which flourished in the first half of this century, until an urban consciousness became a more marked influence on our national repertoire. (Bush landscapes continue to be significant spaces, however, in plays by Hewett, Nowra and Balodis, for example). These particular pieces have been chosen because they illustrate between them two of the main strategies for rendering landscape in realist drama. Thus, in *Pioneers*, the landscape is made partially visible through a window, but it is the settlers' hut which is the main feature of the stage picture. In *The Drovers*, the landscape of the Barklay Tableland is plainly visible and dominates the set, though it is constructed as background to the drovers' camp.

Before continuing with a closer analysis of these pieces, it will be worth considering briefly a third strategy for rendering landscape in realist drama. This third approach is partially evident in *Pioneers*, as will be discussed shortly. But it is most fully realised in 'room' plays such as Millicent Armstrong's one-acter, *At Dusk.*[4] Here, the bush landscape – a centrally important presence – is not scenically rendered at all; rather, it is communicated exclusively through dialogue, spoken by characters immured within a domestic interior. (There are, however, important indices of the external world, in theatrical devices such as moonlight and dogs barking). The stage in *At Dusk* is given over entirely to the interior of a bush homestead; as a result, the landscape is figured, through dialogue, as offstage space.

Peter Womack regards offstage space as a fundamental component of realist drama, suggesting that the 'portentous shadow of offstage events is a theatre resource, like music, or athleticism, or melodramatic coincidence', and that the invisibility of offstage space is itself an important theatrical sign, 'shown as not shown'.[5] The flats of the set, the three walls of realist dramaturgy, constitute equally that which is without as well as that within. Offstage space, discursively created by the characters, is a coercive reality that invades the secluded acting area, announcing the conditions that determine the lives of the *dramatis personae.* Jane Goodall has observed that tensions between the 'enclosed spaces of domestic routine and the uncanny transformative powers of the landscape are especially marked in white Australian drama'.[6] Such

tensions in may Australian realist works, such as *At Dusk*, also suggest that the structural opposition between onstage and offstage is a matter of ideological conflict. In these plays, landscape is constructed as an external force, embodying the actual or metaphoric character of the societal world. As such, it represents the objective world of history and action. In contrast, and frequently in opposition, is the dramatic world of the individual consciousness, situated within the confined and confining space of the domestic interior. This arrangement serves to reify the perceived opposition of consciousness and conditions:

> Here is Humanity (free individual subjects, represented by living actors), and there is History (objective collective necessities, represented by reports and offstage noises). If we spell out the complementary processes which the theatre thereby makes itself incapable of depicting – the production of humanity by history, and the making of history by human beings – it immediately becomes clear enough that the opposition is an ideological one.[7]

As noted earlier, this opposition is made most explicit in a play such as *At Dusk,* where the landscape is described but not shown. The physical structure of the hut in that play actualises the conceptual split between inner and outer worlds.

However, the same opposition is evident to a degree in *Pioneers,* which, despite its depiction of the exterior by means of views through a window and door, is also essentially a room play. Clearly, in a work which invests so much in the influence of landscape, the room convention imposes substantial restrictions. In fact, as John McCallum has remarked, tensions between an interior domestic setting and the vast Australian landscape became one of the distinguishing features of the outback drama genre. In these plays:

> individuals increasingly retreated into the bleak, rough, pathetically decorated corrugated iron shacks which have become the chief scenic stereotype of the genre. In these settings the land is represented by the red glow projected on the cyclorama through the upstage centre door .... A perennial problem in Australian realism is that the land is too important and too vast a protagonist to be adequately represented in this way.[8]

The interior setting in *Pioneers* is a rough timber hut, rather than a corrugated iron shack; and the landscape is rendered iconically, presumably on a painted canvas, rather than as an impressionistic 'red glow'. Nevertheless, McCallum's remarks are useful in identifying the inside/outside structural logic in Prichard's play.

The representation by a box-set of a living or drawing room has become, since Mme Vestris' pioneering productions in the 1830s, the signature design of realist dramaturgy. One of the commonest means by which the immediate (domestic) dramatic world is shown in relation to its external environment is the device of a view, through a window or door, to the outside. Often, this view opens out to nature, and is probably the most frequently used technique for showing landscapes (as distinct from describing them) in realist drama. Darko Suvin has remarked on this formal device, relating it in particular to the appearance, through a glass pane, of a gloomy fiord landscape in Ibsen's *Ghosts.* These icy peaks stand for 'Nature as inhuman Nemesis',[9] and embody a transhistoric, apolitical morality, more profound than the ethics of a fragile and transient bourgeois society. As such, the external landscape, rendered as 'background', functions as a form of destiny, a secular version of Fate or the gods as they appeared in drama up to and including the Renaissance.[10]

As distinct from *At Dusk*, both *Pioneers* and *The Drovers* tend to insinuate a degree of mediation, even intervention, by individuals in the external world of conditions and history. One of the main ways in which such intervention is made manifest is via the framing of landscape. In *Pioneers*, this framing is achieved principally by windows and doors, built structures which imbue the domestic interior – the site of individual, asocial consciousness – with some measure of control over

the external landscape. In this play, the central characters, Donald Cameron and his wife Mary, are shown transforming the wilderness around them into productive farmland. Images of the bush landscape appear through the hut's window and (and at least) one of the doors. These then become thresholds, or liminal structures with which the Camerons try 'to protect their threatened identities from either the social environment or the external natural world'.[11]

In *The Drovers,* the signs of human occupation are much less in evidence; certainly, there are no windows with which to shape and control the environment. Here instead it is the stage itself which frames the landscape. The static scene, centred on the slow demise of the mortally injured Briglow, has the picturesque quality of a painted canvas, an impressionistic image come quietly to life within the proscenium arch. And the image which is captured is more than a simple portrait of life on the stock route; rather, it is a typified expression of a romantic, heroic ideal, a paradigm for the kind of myth-as-History on which 'Australianness' has largely been invented.

The preceding comments provide a theoretical context for a more detailed discussion of the two plays. *Pioneers* is a one-acter adapted by Prichard from her award-winning novel *The Pioneers.*[12] The play was staged, together with *The Drovers* and two other short pieces, by the Pioneer Players on 3 December 1923. Its message of libertarian morality appears to coincide with the playwright's own political persuasions, at least inasmuch as these are evident in her other work, and in her avowed sympathies for socialist ideals.[13] One of the chief significances of *Pioneers*, in fact, is the relation in the play between landscape discourse and socio-political commentary. In particular, notions of order and control associated with the landscape are related to the play's apparent indictment of a so-called civilised culture's doctrine of law and order. As Bill Dunstone puts it, the analysis of 'woman and convict alike as victims is analogous to ... the exploitation and despoliation of the bush by the new colonists'.[14] The ways in which these ideas intersect will be made clearer following a consideration of the play's stage picture.

The general arrangement of the set, as specified by the playwright, is simple: a single room, a bed, tables and chairs, domestic items, two doors and a window. Considering the signifying power of these objects, the set functions not only iconically (it looks like a hut), but indexically too, by pointing to the kind of existence the settlers are hewing from their environment. It might also be understood in symbolic terms, by representing the idea – the condition – of pioneering. Virtually everything on the stage signifies the Camerons' dependence on their natural environment: the timber furniture appears newly handmade, the bed slung on saplings, and so on.

This stage picture might be read as showing a holistic relationship between the Camerons and their environment, as if a natural harmony has been established between humans and landscape. With due regard to other aspects of the play, however, particularly to what is said about the surrounding landscape, it is difficult to sustain such a reading. Rather than conveying a sense of equilibrium between domus and landscape, the play's opening sequence in particular depicts the transformation of the environment: the wilderness surrounding the hut is being re-inscribed with the signs of European occupation. The landscape here becomes a kind of palimpsest, its original text written over in the language of land clearance and ownership, according to the standard cultural – and necessarily ideological – dispositions of European civilisation. And the discursive terms in which this shift from a natural to a human order is communicated are those of struggle, conquest and ownership, rather than of mutuality or interdependence.

Consider, for example, Cameron's linguistic relation to his selection. As he gazes proudly beyond the cleared land to the hills beyond, he remarks that 'it's been a great fight to plough this bit of land' (91), the sense of honour-in-battle implicit in his words. 'Up there, where there are trees now, will be ploughed fields and an orchard soon' he tells his wife. (92) For him, the distinction

between an (apparently) useless wilderness, and soon-to-be productive farmland, is clear. The 'bit of land' he chose as a free settler was *tabula rasa* before his arrival, a blank sheet uninscribed with history or culture. He reminds his wife that 'it is a new country and a new people we're making' (96), as if no people, nor cultures, nor even habitation of the land, existed prior to his arrival. This was of course a standard attitude in colonial Australia, and continues to have its influence in the nation's cultural and political life.[15]

For Cameron, then, the land, and ownership of the land, are cognate concepts. His vision for the future is informed utterly by the transfiguration of the land into a landscape of commodity:

> I'll run more cattle – but we must push back the forest. Clear more and more land .... to think I worked all my born days in the Old Country ... without so much as a plot of sour earth as big as a handkerchief to call my own .... Now this is mine ... a hundred acres ... and more land when I'm ready for it, more and more. (91-2)

The work of the pioneers is in a sense not just to 'settle' the land, but actually to create it, at least insofar as it is to be worth viewing to the European eye. It is as if, by writing the signs of occupation into the land, and by naming things, the landscape is brought into being. And, as suggested earlier, this construction of the landscape as commodity is given scenic expression by means of window and door.

Views through these openings foreground the imposition of human order on the land; by framing and regulating the exterior world, the window and doors render the environment as scenery, composed, as it were, for the human eye. What is made visible is the meeting of opposites – the signs of human occupation in the cleared sections, gradually encroaching on the virgin forest beyond. Considered in pictorial terms, these views exhibit qualities inherent in certain types of colonial landscape painting. In works by William Tibbits, for example, and Henry Gritten:

> views of the small mixed farms of early settlement seem to convey a sense of admiration for the laborious achievement of order, for the way in which fields have been cleared and fenced, livestock and gardens have been made to survive.[16]

As Bernard Smith has commented, to artists such as these the landscape could be made to look beautiful or picturesque by the patterns imposed on it by human settlement. 'European man's dominion over nature could impose comforting pictorial universals, it could render the wilderness benign'.[17]

These attitudes of control and ownership are only partially shared by Mary, Cameron's wife. And it is in her perhaps unconventional response to the landscape that the play's socio-political concerns are obliquely introduced. Mary, an ex-convict, finds herself alone in a 'strange, lonely land'. (97) Her feelings of fear and isolation are projected onto the landscape by means of a quasi-expressionistic personification of the bush, wherein it is attributed with a life, as it were, of its own. Recalling the clearing of the land, she muses on the notion of 'property', asking herself 'Ours? ... How they came down ... cursing ... the great trees'. (90) An apparently conspiratorial quality in the trees – 'If only the leaves wouldn't whisper and sigh so!' (98) – intensifies her anxiety.

Passages such as these suggest that the exterior world is shaped to some extent by Mary's interior world, a consciousness under stress. At the same time though, the play presents the landscape as an independent, brooding presence encircling the hut, 'working' on Mary and creating her unease. The potency of the silent forest, the smallness of the hut in relation to it, and Mary's repeated references to the intense life of the bush, all combine to convey a sense of the domestic, human world as somehow under the control of a sensing environment. There is, then, a mutually determining dynamic between 'in here' and 'out there', but it is couched principally in terms of struggle and antagonism.

This discourse of struggle also informs the political discourse in *Pioneers*. For the Camerons' hardship is set against the desperate straits of the two escapees, whose struggle for survival is even more extreme. While the pioneers fight to conquer the natural environment, the convicts have opted for the wilderness in preference for the known tortures they will suffer in the man-made penal system. The play resists, therefore, a simplistic polarisation of Noble Man pitched against hostile Nature; rather, the human versus nature struggle is ironically counterpointed by an indictment of a primitive prison system, which cruelly sets humans against one another and makes 'brutes of men'. (109)

Mary's gesture of humanity in assisting the pair is, in strictly legal terms, a breach of law and order. But just as she suspects human order might not ultimately have a place in the natural order of the bush, so she adheres to a personal ethic of natural – as distinct from legal – justice. For her, the new land is also a kind of moral *tabula rasa.* She tells her husband 'The new clearing's looking fine, all the young green on it .... This country will be the Redeemer, blot out all old stains'. (115) Here, it is suggested, is the true pioneering spirit. Clearing the land becomes a metaphorical expurgation for the new settler, a chance to build a society free of the hatred born of class and ethnic difference. Mary emerges as a figure of moral righteousness, while the characters representing the law are drawn as gormless incompetents.

In contrast to the construction of landscape as a presence separate from the domestic centre of Prichard's play, Esson's *The Drovers* locates its action wholly in an outdoor setting. Indeed, landscape in this 'classical stencil of Man against Nature'[18] functions as a protagonist itself, a character whose influence over the drovers' lives is manifested both in naturalistic and in metaphysical terms. That is, the stoic laconicism of the men is presented as directly conditioned by the heat and dust and vastness of the Barklay Tableland, while at the same time, the landscape has 'the grimness of a fate that broods over men who pit themselves against our vast inland wilderness'.[19] It is in this nature-as-fate theme that the influence of Esson's Irish mentors, perhaps most notably Synge, is most apparent.[20]

The events which constitute the play's action are, in the main, subdued and low-key. Other than the lively opening sequence, in which the stampeding mob is created offstage through sound effects, very little happens in terms of highly-charged action. (There is also Albert's entertaining monologue (9), though this again describes events offstage). *The Drovers,* in fact, if an oxymoron might be allowed, is almost aggressively dispassionate. The relative stasis of the drama, and the austere, unemotional language of the men, help create a suitably stark and restrained atmosphere for a work which has pretensions to genuine tragedy in an Australian setting. These characteristics are carried through into the play's presentation of the plains landscape.

The drovers' camp is made on a little muddied waterhole, fringed with a few gydgea trees. Around and beyond the camp, the plains of the Barklay Tableland, unbroken by timber, stretch to the horizon. Presumably, the landscape is depicted on a cyclorama or backdrop, where a combination of painted images (impressionistic or iconic) and lighting effects suggests the plains, conveying a sense not only of open space, but dust, natural colour and contour as well. This background dominates the entire upstage area, but is not in view for the duration of the performance. Rather, it is gradually revealed by lighting changes, indicating the passage of time from pre-dawn dimness to bright early morning, until 'the all-conquering extent and majesty of the outback is fully revealed for the first time'.[21]

The pictorialised representation of the Australian landscape on the stage has a long tradition. Richard Fotheringham reminds us, for example, that stage pictures of bush scenes, painted around the turn of the century by designers such as John Brunton, were almost invariably the most

approved feature of local plays. 'It is only the total disappearance of these huge landscapes [due to deterioration or being painted over] that prevents them from being seen as at least as important a contribution to Australian art and Australian nationalism in their time as the work of the Heidelberg school of landscape artists'.[22] Bearing this in mind, (and remembering also the influence on Esson of his uncle, the painter John Ford Paterson), I want to suggest that the importance with which the stage picture is invested is greater in *The Drovers* than in most other plays. The relative staticness of the play's events, the compression of its themes into a single, almost unanimated situation, gives the whole stage – not just the backdrop – the quality of a painted canvas, akin to figures in a landscape brought to life and framed within the proscenium arch. Obviously the play differs from a painting in that its narrative unfolds in time, and its figures use language; yet the dialogue serves in a sense to illuminate the stage picture, supporting it somewhat like a caption. The theatrical space is defined pictorially, and dialogue, in general, augments our understanding of the dramatic world.

By comparing *The Drovers* to a painted canvas, it is possible to bring to an understanding of the play certain observations about the cultural and ideological dispositions inherent in traditional genres of landscape painting. The central point to be made is that in traditional European landscape art can be found the first and clearest examples of the selective and partial nature of landscape representation:

> The picturesque neo-classical tradition as established by Claude Lorraine and Nicolas Poussin, and systematised in eighteenth century England by the teachings of the Royal Academy, provided a compositional formula which could be employed for any view: a framing wing of trees on one side in the foreground, with figures beneath, and a zigzag progression through the middle distance to a prospect of hazy mountains.[23]

One of the central ideological assumptions underlying such contrived representations of nature was that aesthetic values such as form and balance – understood as properties of beauty – were expressions of the highest spiritual truths. Thus Goethe could say of Claude's landscapes, for example, that 'these images express the highest truth but have no trace of reality'.[24]

The earliest European artists of Australian landscape 'ordered their vision of the new land through a framework of imported vision and styles'.[25] This idea of conditioned seeing is taken up by Bernard Smith, whose *European Vision and the South Pacific* (1984) argues a cognitive theory of perception: that seeing is conditioned by knowing. Smith's study is instructive in this context for its contention that the predominant mode in nineteenth century landscape painting is the typical landscape. Such works are highly selective, bringing together (though more in a spirit of science than of aesthetics) those features which typify the particular character of an area.[26]

Notions of 'typicality' can usefully be applied to *The Drovers*. Some of the most influential thinking on types and typologies is that of Lukacs, who uses the idea of typicality to indicate 'the process whereby, in classical realist literature, events and individuals are at once uniquely particularised, and representative of broader, deeper trends in history itself'.[27] In a more immediate context, John McCallum has noted that ideas of typicality also inform Russel Ward's *The Australian Legend,* where a crucial distinction is drawn between the typical (normally a romanticised stereotype) and the actual Australian. McCallum goes on to relate Ward's observations on typicality to *The Drovers*, stating that 'taciturnity, stoicism and the laconic panache ... are part of the image of the typical or representative Australian, but probably not attributes possessed by most actual inhabitants. Esson's view of "Australianness" is fundamentally exotic'.[28]

The vision of Australia presented in the play, then, is an idealised one, constructed according to Esson's concern to propagate the ideology of cultural nationalism. Its geographical space – the plains landscape – becomes a cultural space as well, an heroic landscape defined in pictorial terms.

Thus *The Drovers* can be seen to frame culture, to select an interested version of culture and frame it within a stage picture. In other words, there is an impulse to capture an heroic moment in Australia's history, by invoking some presumed mythological essence of national character.

One stage direction, given towards the end of the play, is particularly telling as an illustration of this concern to construct and frame an historical moment:

> *The sun rises. From the edge of the Barklay Tableland, the great plains stretch away, unbroken by timber, except the few gydgea trees that fringe the muddy water-hole. The drovers have disappeared on their journey across the long, dry stage.* (18)

The final sentence here – 'The drovers have disappeared on their journey across the long, dry stage' – is worth noting. First, it involves a simple slippage between the dramatic and theatrical worlds; the fictional dramatic world of the drovers is inadvertently conflated with the real theatrical world of the stage performance. In these terms, it is clear that the stage *per se* is not long and dry; these are properties, rather, of the dramatic landscape suggested by the stage and set. As it stands, this is probably a matter of minor importance. It might serve to remind, however, that the particular meanings of certain theatrical terms are often extended and applied in extra-theatrical contexts. 'Scenery' is an example. This word, having originated in the classical theatre, now also denotes picturesque views presented by natural features. (This also signals, incidentally, the presupposition of theatricality in ideas of landscape). Of more significance, in regard to the drovers' crossing of the long, dry stage, is the ideological disposition suggested by the merging of the real and the fictional. For this stage direction stands for the play's impulse to represent Australia as if it were itself a *stage*, designed for the playing out of history, and upon which the Australian psyche has evolved.

To present such a vision of Australia, as if it is itself a kind of historical stage, is evidence of the construction of what Paul Carter terms 'imperial history'. Carter's account of the partial and selective nature of imperial history is worth quoting in detail:

> According to our historians ... Australia was always simply a stage where history occurred, history a theatrical performance. It is not the historian who stages events, weaving them together to form a plot, but History itself .... Such history is a fabric of self-reinforcing illusions. But above all, one illusion sustains it. This is the illusion of the theatre, and, more exactly, the all-seeing spectator .... Nature's painted curtains are drawn aside to reveal heroic man at his epic labour on the stage of history. This kind of history which reduces space to a stage ... might be called imperial history ....[29]

Carter's remarks indicate the kinds of imported assumptions and tendencies which underpin a nationalist enterprise such as *The Drovers.* It should be remembered that the play was written in London, in response to a temporary West End vogue in 'regional' dramas; the influence on Esson of the Irish dramatists has also to be considered. Clearly the play was designed, at least in part, to conform to – and so to legitimate – one of the standard imperialist conceptions of Australia: that of an idealised rural Utopia, a vast, pre-industrial wilderness which could function as a canvas against which the elemental emotions and dramas of settlement were romantically played out.

Following the departure of the drovers 'across the long, dry stage', the scene is resolved with the tableau of Pidgeon, the aboriginal boy, ministering Briglow's passing while he tends the fire and intones his distinctive form of elegy. The final image is rich in significance, and warrants some attention, as it not only reconciles the play's events, but also encapsulates the attitudes to landscape with which the play is invested. For the play's conventionalised, romanticised representation of landscape is intrinsically linked with, and supported by, its conventionalised representation of the aboriginal boy.

Pidgeon appears three times in the play. His first two brief appearances serve an essentially comic function, in keeping with one of a range of conventions which informed the representation of

indigenous peoples on the white colonial stage. Pidgeon's third appearance, at the end of the play, sharply contrasts with his first two. Rather than offering comic diversion, the boy now adopts a kind of magico-religious discourse, and the whole final sequence is dominated by a tone of quiet solemnity. Pidgeon intones a speech in which he asserts that the dying Briglow has shown in his lifetime the same respect for the land as that shown by aboriginal people. He also prophesies that Briglow, having been an aborigine in a past life, will be reincarnated as an aborigine in the next, only this time with the accumulated kharmic rewards of having lived virtuously:

> 'I think first time you blackfellow, Briglow. You die, then jump up white fellow. Now you die, and bye 'n' bye ... next time, you jump up blackfellow, alonga new fellow country – good country – plenty water, plenty fish, plenty tucker ....' (18)

Pidgeon goes on to promise both a 'proper' white man's burial by the Boss, and a corroboree by his own people, to mark Briglow's passing.

The identification of the indigene with mysticism and magic accords with a stereotype common in colonial drama (and prevalent still to a degree). The stage aborigine, for example, has historically been made to conform to a limited field of signifiers – primarily the sexual, the violent, and the mystical. As Terry Goldie argues, all these facets:

> ... are shaped by the needs of the white text, often in some exploration of the relationship between white culture and the indigene as manifestation of nature. The treacherous redskin and the Indian maiden, the embodiments of violence and sex, are also the embodiments of the emotional signs of fear and temptation, of the white repulsion from and attraction to the land.[30]

Considered in this context, Pidgeon can clearly be seen as shaped by the 'white needs' of the play. He functions, in essence, to confer on the (emblematic) white characters a sense of tribalness and kinship with the land. In the manner of so much colonial literature, this indigene is characterised as mystically attached to the landscape, such that he becomes, in effect, a feature of it. From his first comically ragged appearance behind a tree, to the closing image of him seated meditatively within the vast plains landscape, he is aligned more with nature than with the company of men of which he is a part. In the final scene, Pidgeon is invested with more dignity and authority by virtue of his mystical evocation of tribal ritual and belief, yet this authority serves ultimately to celebrate and exalt the white drovers and their way of life. The rustic toughness of the men, with their fatalistic resignation to the hardships imposed by the land, is held up as somehow analogous to the spiritual bond felt by aborigines with their environment. The drovers can therefore be, simultaneously, hard white cattlemen and spiritual beings with a quasi-religious connection to the land. In this way, the play does acknowledge a special aboriginal response to the landscape – a fact which is notable in itself, given the standard facile treatment afforded indigenous perspectives in early twentieth century drama. However, *The Drovers* finally subordinates its aboriginal discourse to a dominating discourse of the propriety of white occupation, and the concomitant use of the land such occupation entails.

The Drovers, then, espouses the kinds of images of Australianness on which the traditional white mythologies of national character and nationhood were built, and which retain considerable potency still. In doing so, the play conforms to the dramaturgical mode of realism; within that mode, however, it diverges from the conventional realist room setting by situating the action, somewhat adventurously, in an open landscape. Its representation of landscape, therefore, is unmediated by door or window, in contrast to those central framing and containing devices in *Pioneers.* Nevertheless, the painterly, picturesque quality of *The Drovers,* in which the scene is contained by the proscenium arch, helps to construct the landscape in a fashion which is in many ways analogous to the framing effects of Prichard's domestic interior. What is ultimately celebrated in both plays is not the landscape itself, but the resilience and propriety of the human activity situated within it.

To conclude, it might be worth mentioning some more recent Australian works which rely substantially on images of landscape. Plays such as Nowra's *Inside the Island* (1981), Hewett's *The Fields of Heaven* (unpublished, 1982), and Balodis' *Too Young for Ghosts* (1985) have tended to resist the realist model, opting instead for more stylised representations of landscape. Such works do present striking images of bush and rural environments; however, their inventive uses of non-realist techniques, of theatrical images which self-reflexively draw attention to their own signifying power, make available a wider range of readings than the more fixed meanings attached to the early realist stage landscapes. They construct polysemic environments, whose significances are not framed and contained, but multifarious, continually deferred and augmented by other possible meanings. Within these landscapes, though, the human presence seems always to be tenuous and conditional, confirming once again Katharine Brisbane's identification of the Australian landscape as the source of our 'national romantic paranoia'.

NOTES

1. Katharine Brisbane, 'Australian Drama', in Geoffrey Dutton ed., *The Literature of Australia* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1982), p.289.

2. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1975), p.123.

3. Katharine Susannah Prichard, *Pioneers*, in William Moore and T. Inglis Moore, eds., *Best Australian One-Act Plays* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1937); Louis Esson, *The Drovers,* in *Six Australian One-Act Plays (*Sydney: Mulga Publications, 1944). My remarks do not refer to a particular production. They are based on staging as it is specified in the playwrights' stage directions. The CURTAIN direction at the end of each play, for example, implies production on a proscenium arch stage.

4. Millicent Armstrong, *At Dusk,* in William Moore and T. Inglis Moore. The 'ghost story' aspect to this play qualifies the classification of it as strictly realist. However, it conforms to the formal conventions of realist dramaturgy.

5. Peter Womack, 'Noises Off', *Textual Practice,* 1, 3 (1987), p.323, p.310.

6. Jane Goodall, 'Some rooms in outer space', *Australasian Drama Studies, 19* (October 1991), 26.

7. Womack, p.320.

8. John McCallum, '"Something with a cow in it": Louis Esson's imported nationalism', *Australian Drama 1920-1955* (Armidale: Department of Continuing Education, University of New England, 1986), p.50.

9. Darko Suvin, *To Brecht and Beyond* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1984), p.60.

10. Suvin, p.33 ff.

11. Bill Dunstone, 'Another Planet: Landscape as metaphor in Western Australian Theatre', in Bennett and Hay eds., *European Relations: Essays for Helen Watson-Williams* (Perth: Centre for Studies in Australian Literature, University of Western Australia, 1985), p.74.

12. Katharine Susannah Prichard, *The Pioneers* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1915). This novel won one thousand pounds in the Colonial Section of the Hodder and Stoughton novel competition; it was subsequently made into a film in 1916, and remade in 1926.

13. See e.g. Ric Throssell, 'Paths towards purpose: the political plays of Katharine Susannah Prichard and Ric Throssell', *Australian Drama 1920-1955*, pp.28-38.

14. Dunstone, p.70.

15. Recent debate and tensions generated by the Mabo decision on aboriginal land rights are evidence of this.

16. Australian Bicentennial Authority, *The Face of Australia: The Land – The Past* (Killara, NSW: Fine Arts Press, 1988), p.15.

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20. See McCallum, pp.39-51 for an account of Esson's contact with the dramatists of the Abbey Theatre.

21. Carroll, p.21.

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29. Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), pp.xiv-xvi.

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